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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM The Today Show

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SUBJECT Interview with Carol Bellamy

BRYANT GUMBEL: Our guest on Closeup this morning is Carol Bellamy. She is New York City's Council President, the number two person running this city. She was in Moscow for a week. She's just back, arrived back less than 48 hours, in fact. She talked with the Mayor of Moscow about city government and problems. And while hers was a private visit, the real reason for her trip was to see if the Soviets would allow more Jews to leave the Soviet Union.

Good morning and welcome back.

CAROL BELLAMY: Well, thank you very much.

GUMBEL: First I've got to ask you, the gentleman you work for, Mayor Koch, gentleman number one in charge, called the Soviets "those Red nuts." With that in mind, what kind of a reception did you get there?

BELLAMY: The officials actually were quite gracious, although they did remind me that the Mayor had offered some choice comments.

GUMBEL: Okay. Fill us in. How do you read the fact that each year fewer and fewer Soviet Jews are allowed to emigrate to the United States?

BELLAMY: Clearly, the situation is much worse. Jews and others who seek to leave -- my particular concern was the question of Jewish emigration. Three years ago, over 50,000 were granted permits to leave. They expect there will be fewer than 5000, between five and nine thousand this year. The situation is just getting much worse.

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GUMBEL: Now, the Soviets would of course respond and say that not that many want to leave.

BELLAMY: Well, the figures dispute that. I mean I met with refuseniks who've been there seeking to leave for over 10 years, to be reunited with their families in Israel. The figures show that there are over half a million seeking to leave.

GUMBEL: Out of a total Jewish population of what?

BELLAMY: Over two million, almost three million.

GUMBEL: Okay.

BELLAMY: But again, one would think that since there are families, they seek to leave. These aren't denouncing the country, but they want to be with their family -- they'd be allowed to do that.

GUMBEL: Is the oppression that the Jews are experiencing in the Soviet Union, is it to a much higher degree than other Soviets are under the same system, a system that is repressive?

BELLAMY: My sense is that is so. I mean Saturday evening I was there. The Jews gather, traditionally, in front of the synagogue in Moscow. It's on a sidestreet, doesn't block any traffic. When I was there, the police came up in a vehicle, a police vehicle, an armored vehicle, announced that the people had to disperse, sent them moving quite quickly. I was told that that hadn't happened in over six years.

People's apartments are being entered, materials being confiscated, classes being disrupted. It's very bad.

GUMBEL: I'm sure you could confront many Latins, many Haitians, many Asians who would say, "Hey, we would like to get into the United States also, would like to be able to leave, and we can't get the doors open for us. Why, then, should you be so overly concerned or of the opinion that we should go out of our way for Soviet Jews?

How do you respond?

BELLAMY: This wasn't really a question of emigration to the United States. This, indeed, is a question of the ability to leave, to be reunited with their families. And the policies of the Soviet Union, whether it's the Jewish community or -- in fact, I met with Baptists who were holed up, quite honestly, in the American Embassy.

GUMBEL: Pentecostals, right? There's a family.

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BELLAMY: That is correct, a couple of families.

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The failure of the Soviet Union to allow people seeking to be with their families, to leave to be with their families, is something that you won't find in the United States. It's not a question of denial of the right to enter into the United States. There's a discussion about immigration, but there's not a denial to leave. If someone seeks to leave the United States to be with their family, that's not something that we deny. There is a different mentality, there is a denial of the kind of discrimination that exists. It is an environment in the Soviet Union that, I must tell you, I was quite pleased to leave.

GUMBEL: The spirit of the Soviet Jewish community. Good? Bad? Rebellious? Passive?

BELLAMY: It's wonderful. Given the harassment that's going on, given the police harassment that goes on, it is extraordinary.

GUMBEL: Carol Bellamy, again, thank you very much.